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Children's perspective to curriculum work: Meaningful moments in Finnish early childhood education

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Abstract

Recently, and especially in early childhood education, there has been a transition from understanding child perspective to understanding children's perspective. Taking children's perspective as a foundational starting point, we explore and identify moments that children find important, meaningful and positive in their daily life at the context of pre-primary education. We use empirical evidence from our research situated within the cultural context of Finnish early childhood education where children documented their pre-primary education experiences with digital cameras, and reflected upon them in joint discussions with their peers and researchers. We discuss to what extent these documentation and reflection practices can be used as tools for understanding children's perspective to meaningful moments in the Finnish pre-primary context, and what implications this kind of approach would set for curriculum, curriculum assessment, and curriculum development.

From child perspective to children's perspective

Recently, and especially in early childhood education, there has been a transition from understanding child perspective to understanding children's perspective. According to Sommer and others (Sommer, Pramling & Hundeide, 2010), child perspective directs adult's attention towards understanding of children's perceptions, experiences, and actions. It is the adult's interpretation of children's statements and actions. Child perspective is expressed in adult's words and thoughts, for instance, through scientific concepts and theories concerning children and childhood. One could say that what is important for children, as seen by adults, is child perspective. Instead, children's perspective represents children's experiences, perceptions, and understandings in their life-worlds. The focus is on the child as subject, not object, in their own world: What children say and do, express what is meaningful to them. Children's perspective is always expressed in the children's own words, thoughts, and images.

The theoretical rationale of capturing children's perspective and experience comes mainly from three traditions, which overlap and complete each other; research on children's rights relying on the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child, sociology of childhood, and socioculturally oriented research on learning and development. These three traditions together have inspired a significant paradigm shift for the early childhood educational research.

Those that propose children's rights, rely their arguments often on social science studies; if children have the right to participate in social life, they should have the right to express their opinions and experiences regarding their participation (Shier, 2001; Smith, 2002). Adults should recognize children's abilities and right to participate in societal activities and to speak for themselves. Sociology of childhood emphasizes children as beings not becomings. In this

tradition, children are seen as social actors and as active participants of society. Children are the experts of their own life who are no longer envisaged merely as the recipients of services, beneficiaries of protective measures or subjects of social experiments (Christensen & James, 2008; Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta & Wintersberger, 1994). Children's rights and sociology of childhood are overlapping in a sense that both share a focus on children as active agents, constructors of their own social worlds. Socioculturally oriented research on learning and development has shown that in some, and especially in non-western cultures, children in all ages are given an active role in their community, resulting in major changes in children's participation opportunities and perspectives over time. In these non-western cultures, children are part of adult world and learning is understood as legitimate peripheral participation, embedded in socio-cultural activities. In other words, development depends on cultural goals, and transformation in participation (Fleer, 2003; Rogoff, 2003). We do not consider these three approaches as rival nor theoretically incompatible, and in our approach one can find nuances of each of them.

Insights to Finnish early childhood education

Finland aims to deliver integrated system of early childhood education. It covers and merges both the early childhood education for children and the child day care arrangements offered to the families. For families, pre-primary education is voluntary and free of charge in Finland. Pre-primary education is part of early childhood education and care, and begins one year before the commencement of compulsory education. Organizing pre-primary education year before compulsory education is a statutory obligation for the municipalities. Thus, the majority of Finnish pre-primary education, including pre-primary education class of our study, is publicly funded and organized.

The staff in day care centers is required to have at least a secondary-level degree in the field of social welfare and health care (ISCED level 3). One in three of the staff must have a tertiary level degree (ISCED level 5) – kindergarten teachers are required to have studied up to university or polytechnic level and need to have a bachelor's diploma. Pre-primary teachers are required to have either a bachelor or master's degree in education.

A national pedagogical framework is a rather new phenomenon within early childhood education - it began to appear in early childhood education in many places of the world in the middle of the 1990s (Sommer et al., 2010). The content of the Finnish ECEC is guided by the National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC (2003) and the Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education (2010). According to the National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC, the principal target of ECEC is to promote the child's overall well-being so as to ensure the best possible conditions for growth, learning and development. In doing so, Finnish early childhood education practices and pedagogy combine care, education, and teaching in the daily activities as a whole (The National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC in Finland, 2005). The daily practices of Finnish day care centers include educator-initiated activities, such as reading to children and presenting materials-based learning. Activities such as having lunch, dressing for outdoor activities, and taking naps are also considered educationally valuable offering learning opportunities for children. Educators play an important role in these activities by guiding and helping children. The child is viewed as an active learner, whose learning is guided by curiosity, the will to explore and joy of realization. Rather than setting goals for children, The National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC set comprehensive standards for child care environments and activities that address the developmental needs of the whole child.

Kindergartens adhere to more detailed early childhood plans that each municipality must create to implement the national curriculum guidelines. National Curriculum Guidelines on early childhood education provide a basis for local curricula drawn up by municipalities. It encourages the entire staff to be involved in drafting, implementing, monitoring and evaluating local curricula. Unit-specific curricula complement the local one. They should include principles for drafting and follow-up of ECEC plans that are made for every child individually. National Curriculum Guidelines for early childhood education encourage parents, children and co-operation partners to be involved in planning and evaluating these curricula.

The child's individual ECEC plan sets criteria for assessment. In Finnish early childhood education, the object of assessment is implementation of curriculum rather than child outcomes. However, The National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC states that staff should systematically and consciously observe the child's development and take the observations account in planning activities and child's individual ECEC plan. The implementation of child's individual ECEC plan as well as the implementation of unit-specific curriculum are assessed among the staff and together with parents.

It is also stated that children's own views should be taken into account in early childhood education to a degree corresponding to their age and level of development. Thus, children's perspective is enrooted in Finnish early childhood education curricula, as Scandinavian early childhood education curricula more widely. According to Sommer et al. (2010) there is an intention in the curricula in Scandinavia to see children as active participants with rights to influence their every daily lives in ECE.

However, it is not stated in Curriculum Guidelines how to enhance and enable children's perspectives and how could it inform curriculum planning and assessment. There is, thus, a need for the development of approaches and practices that recognize and harness children's participation and perspective in curriculum work. As pointed out by Hedges Cullen and Jordan (2011), existing research has rarely investigated children's interests as important 'funds of knowledge' nor teachers' knowledge and decision-making in creating curriculum and assessment based on children's interests and perspectives.

Capturing children's perspective to curriculum work

According to Clark (2005; see also Smith; Duncan & Marshall, 2005), capturing children's perspective and experiences is understood to be an active process of communication involving hearing, interpreting and co-constructing meanings. Thus, children must be given the opportunity to express their perspectives and voice, and they should be facilitated to express themselves. Listening and involving young children requires the refinement of research methods to meet the authentic worlds and voices of children. In addition to the traditional methods such as observation, interview, questionnaires, these include not so traditional methods such as using use of cameras and audio equipment, tours, map making and arts-based activities (Clark, 2005; Cook & Hess; Fler & Quinones, 2009).

In this paper, we draw on a case study from a Finnish pre-primary community, in order to illuminate practices that aim at recognizing children's perspective to curriculum work. In specific, we shall demonstrate moments and matters that children have identified important, meaningful and positive in their daily life at pre-primary education. This empirical case is drawn from a large ongoing research initiative studying children's efficacious agency in

formal and informal contexts (Kumpulainen, Järvelä, & Lipponen, 2010; Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2010). After exploring to what extent these documentation and reflection practices can be used as tools for understanding children's perspective to meaningful moments in the Finnish pre-primary context, we will be able to discuss, what implications this kind of approach would set for curriculum, curriculum assessment, and curriculum development.

Altogether 19 preschool children (6-7 years old), 9 girls and 10 boys, from one public preschool class participated in the study. The children represented the lower and upper middle class of Finnish society in terms of socioeconomic background. The female teacher (Ellen) of this preschool community was a qualified kindergarten and preschool teacher.

Preschool community of the case study participated in a two-week, two-phase progressive enculturation process leading to documenting, sharing and reflecting upon their lives and experiences by taking photographs and videos with digital cameras (Kumpulainen, Lipponen, Hilppö, & Mikkola, 2013). During the first phase, we took part in the everyday life of the preschool community and engaged with the children in discussions about their meaningful experiences during a preschool day. This was followed by the children starting to familiarize themselves with the cameras (assisted by us) and taking photos based on their own interests. The second phase started with a joint discussion during which the children and researchers agreed on what to capture with the digital cameras. We encouraged the children to take photos of things and situations which were important and meaningful to them, and about which they felt happy and glad. The cameras were available throughout the day, and during the research period they were part of the children's everyday activities. At the end of each preschool day, the children participated in joint focus group discussions (three children per group) with us where they shared their photos and collectively reflected upon them. Photo

reflections/interviews lasted from 25 minutes to an hour, and were video recorded. The child-adult interactions and reflections upon the photos were transcribed in full. Relevant contextual information such as reference to the photo talked about, pointing and other non-verbal gestures were included in the transcriptions to guide the children's reading.

Central to our analysis was a multi-step process that involved progressive refinement of our representations and claims about the nature of moments that were important to the children. Firstly, we took a rough overview of all the transcriptions and videos and made content logs, that is, a time - indexed list of topics (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). Next, keeping our research questions in mind, we read the transcriptions and watched the videos several times in an attempt to identify the regularities and patterns in the data source (Mitchell, 1984; Roth, 2005). We also looked through all the photos children took. In sum, our analysis proceeded as a series of cycles during which questions are posed, data is represented, in our case in the form of video records and transcriptions. In our analysis we have attempted to gain insights into the meanings the children ascribe to their lives and experiences. Specific value is placed on the children's personal voice and experiences, and the opportunity to broaden their perspective of knowing, thinking and acting (Herrenkohl & Guerra 1998; Kumpulainen & Renshaw 2007).

Reflections on the procedure of the study

Children's recorded meaningful moments highlighted the rich variation in what the children identified as present and meaningful to them in their preschool lives. The moments captured, documented and mediated in and by photographs were not tied to any specific domain or life world, but rather distributed across various domains, and as a network of positive emotional

valence. Children took photos in the library, at lunch, and in the playground during outdoor activities, thus connecting their experiences across place and time.

The children were very enthusiastic about the study, and took part in every phase of it with great excitement and engagement. When we introduced the cameras to the children for the first time, they could hardly wait their turn to try them. The children learned to use the cameras very quickly, and whenever they invented a new feature or new way of using them, they very spontaneously taught it to the other children. When somebody was taking photographs, the other children were very interested in the photographer, and her or his doings: Taking photographs was an activity that made the children to come together in a new and unexpected ways. Photographing and sharing photos with friends appeared to be a meaningful practice in itself.

The cameras were available all day. This time-space configuration of the pre-school learning environment provided them with diverse and rich possibilities for becoming engaged and involved with the cameras. Cameras were not just tools for documenting and sharing sparkling moments, but appeared to be a constitutional part of children's everyday activities and experiences. For some of the children photographing itself became a very meaningful activity. The children explored the various features of the cameras, and dimensions of their learning environment in order to take visually imposing photos.

During the two-week study period, every child took photos, of total 477 photos (from 3 to 66 per child). Three broad themes appeared in the photos and the children's stories. The children's meaningful moments were especially related to personally significant places and artifacts (178 photos), relationships with peers and adults (263 photos), and opportunities to do things that they considered important (102 photos). For the joint sessions, every child

chose photos to reflect on, and to talk with and to talk about. The number of photos reflected on per child varied from two to nine photos, and 74 altogether.

Ethical Consideration

Since the study is based on the idea that children have their own views and experiences and have the right to be heard (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Einarsdóttir, 2007) we considered children as leading authors in documenting and reflecting upon their lives and experiences. The focus was on the child as a subject, not as an object, in his or her own world. Children, teachers and parents were informed about all the aspects of the research. We also asked for a written authorization from children's parents, and nobody refused their child's participation in the study. After the study, we organized an event for the children and the parents, and discussed the study, the experiences, the results, and the possible implications of the study. At every phase of the study, we tried to protect children's anonymity and privacy, and to treat children, parents and teachers with dignity. We are aware that our research project (of which this study is a part) should, at least in the long run, contribute to children's lives in situ, but also through future research and policy.

With our inquiry, we attempted to gain insights into the meanings the children ascribe to their lives and experiences. We were interested in what moments children identify as important, meaningful and positive in their daily lives at preschool, and how children reflect upon these important moments in their lives mediated by their self-initiated photos in a supportive social context. In the next section, we will discuss, how children's perspective inform the curriculum development and assessment.

Children's perspective informing the curriculum development

The Finnish National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC defines the core of learning situating in the interaction between children, adults and the environment. Playing, movement, exploration, and self-expression through different forms of art are defined as children's peculiar ways of acting and thinking. These activities are considered to enhance their well-being and perception of themselves and increase their opportunities for participation. An activity that children find meaningful also gives insights to their thoughts and feelings. As educators interact and discuss with children and observe their activities, they also begin to understand children's world and thinking. And most importantly, children are able to feel that their explorations, questions, thinking and activity are valuable, they are heard and recognized.

Our case illustrated that with and through the cameras, the children started to pay attention to their living environments in a new way. Thus, it is not only teachers who can learn to see the curriculum from the children's perspective but the activity of documenting meaningful moments with cameras and reflective upon them, provided children with new learning opportunities to see their life words (Kumpulainen et al., 2013). Children described how *physical learning environments* made them feel happy, because they were sites for play and for fun. For instance, outdoor learning environments and activities such as playing with the snow, were considered very gratifying. As pointed out by Fattore Mason and Watson (2007) those environments that fill children with joy do not have to be some 'special location', but sites for daily play and leisure activities. The following picture (picture 1), taken by Michael, and the excerpt is an example of how children did word they daily outdoor activities.



Picture 1.

Adult: Could you tell me what you have here. (Points to the picture on the computer screen. The picture is selected by the child to for discussion).

Michael (child): This is, I just like this. I like when others are playing.

Adult: Would you like to tell something more about this picture, what do you play there, looks like fun.

Michael: It is not a play, others are just playing something. And look, this is really fun, this is the fanciest. Those, those things they glitter. (Points to the picture on the computer screen) the picture). Looks like Jude goes on the speed of light.

The children also talked a lot about different *artifacts* (see picture 2), and explained how artifacts such as books, toys, self-made pictures and crafts were special and personally meaningful to them (see also Clark, 2005). Self-made artifacts appeared to be especially important, and the possibility to play with them (usually with others), show them to somebody, and the possibility to give them to someone as a gift.



Picture 2.

Thus, in daily activities artifacts appeared to have a double function. Firstly, they mediated the interaction, like play activities, between the children and between children and adults (Vygotsky, 1978). Secondly, the artifacts had the meaning of social attachment, especially the self-made ones.

Both, *peers* (see picture 1) and *adults* (see picture 3), were important to the children, the peers having a more central and visible role in everyday preschool life. The peers were talked about in positive ways, and positive emotional expressions were associated with them. They were great fun to play with and hang out with, they were excellent, funny, and nice. Giving help to peers and receiving help from them was captured in several photos, and was also talked into being in the reflection situations. The teacher, Ellen, as experienced and talked about by the children, appeared to be a person who spent time with the children, and was there for them and for their everyday needs. She offered care, protection, and social resources (like giving help), which were considered important from the children's perspective. Children also mentioned several times that Ellen helped them to learn new things.



Picture 3.

The data shows children finding joy in *being active agents* (see picture 4) in documenting and reflecting upon their lives with others in supportive contexts.



Picture 4.

Supportive adults can provide children with a secure learning environment, where they can practice their agency, and develop the learning identity of an active agent. One important aspect of developing agency is having the opportunity to participate and contribute in interaction, where one is framed and positioned as an accountable author who is in charge of one's actions. Acting as an accountable author is enabled by the creation of interactional

spaces in which children are positioned as contributors whose inputs are recognized and credited (Greeno, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). The way the teacher constructs the environment together with the children, and what kinds of experiences this provides are decisive for child's learning and possibilities of grasping the world around them. Thus, teachers must see the learning possibilities in the child's environment.

Discussion

It is not easy to catch a meaningful moment. In some sense, a meaningful moment is an abstract and immaterial entity, an indefinite interval of time or specific point of time. To capture a meaningful moment, one has to somehow make it concrete or materialize it. This is what children did when they photographed their meaningful moments.

It is not a new idea to use photos as stimuli in an interview. They have been used as a part of interviews, especially in sociological and anthropological research (Collier, 1957; Harper, 2002). This type of interview, in which photographs have been used as interview stimuli, has been called a photo-elicitation interview (Cappello, 2005; Harper, 2002), or photo-elicitation "autodriven" interview (Clark, 1999) where the photographs to be used later as interview stimuli are taken by the research participants (interviewees). In contrast to stimulated recall interviews (Calderhead, 1981) where the stimuli are produced and selected by the researcher, here the stimuli (photos) were produced by the children themselves.

We have illustrated before that children's meaningful moments may be so 'small' that they do not grab one's attention if one does not deliberately focus on identifying and noting them. If the teachers do not grasp children's perspective and do not identify those meaningful

moments important for them, a possibility to construct shared meanings and fruitful opportunities for learning will be missed. Teacher curriculum decision-making should, therefore, be a conscious process that draws on understandings about children, curriculum, pedagogy, and context (Hedges et al., 2011), providing a positive way for teachers to acknowledge the richness of children's lives.

No research evidence exist showing that some particular curriculum or pedagogical approach can be identified as the best. But as maintained by Sommer et al. (2010), the high quality curricula stress issues such as, active child, cooperation with the parents, the view of children's rights and, teacher professionalism, and children's perspective. "Since education is always normative, based on the intentions of the curriculum or the teacher's ideas, one can say that child perspectives are respected in all early childhood education of good quality, while we who advocate development pedagogy also try to let the children's subjective worlds come through – that is children's perspectives" (Sommer et al., 2010, p. 201).

Hedges et al. (2011) state, that one promising direction to search for children's interest and perspective for curriculum development is funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005). The notion of funds of knowledge provides one such framework for a stronger interpretation of children's experiences and interests in order to enhance curriculum planning and assessment. Funds of knowledge are local networks of cultural know-how created within different communities, such as families, in order to solve everyday challenges.

It is important to acknowledge that it also is a challenging task to use children's perspective to inform curriculum development and assessment. Children's perspectives are always ambiguous: They can be easily shaped by established ideas about the child or child's

interpretation about what adults want to hear. Moreover, individual differences among the children and their life worlds may position some children in unwanted marginal. Children's perspectives can be used to prove something what was going to be argued in any case (see for example Spyrou, 2011). Reflexivity is therefore needed when enabling children's perspective in curriculum planning and assessment. Whose perspectives are valued and heard after all or in the end?

Conclusions

Children's perspective to curriculum work by means of documentation and collective reflection appears as a positive and prominent approach which can encourage educators to take a more analytical interpretation of children's interests in early-years education. This perspective also positions children as active agents in examining and potentially shaping early-years curriculum, supplementing and even challenging the Finnish early years curriculum and policy recommendations. To strengthen, and to raise the awareness of the importance of children's perspective, the national pedagogical framework for ECE (at least in Finland) could entail the theoretical foundations for understanding it. The curriculum guidelines should also highlight capturing, harnessing, and applying children's perspective in, and for curriculum design. Taking children's perspective seriously has consequences for ECE teacher education as well. It calls for re-orienting the still dominating developmental view of child and childhood towards understanding childhood more broadly, including understanding children's interest and life worlds. Additionally, it calls ECE professionals to develop practical methods and to share examples for capturing, harnessing, and applying children's perspective in, and for curriculum design. In all, our research directs attention to the possibilities that children's perspective embedded in authentic and engaging practices grant

for getting to know children and how they experience the curriculum and activities in the preschool environment.

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